Rationalizing Japan's Grammar-Translation Approach with True Grammar Needs

Anscomb-Iino, John-Russell
Faculty of Languages and Cultures, Kyushu University

https://doi.org/10.15017/1786392

出版情報：英語英文学論叢. 63, pp.27-41, 2013-03-18. The English Language and Literature Society
バージョン：
権利関係：

"Rationalizing Japan's Grammar-Translation Approach with True Grammar Needs"

John-Russell Anscomb-Iino

Abstract ~

This paper concludes that an ideal solution to the limitations and weaknesses included in the teaching and learning processes involved in second language (English) programmes in Japan is highly unlikely in the immediate future. However, with the realization that the complicated nature of the problem was not limited to a particular teaching methodology or even to the abuses of that methodology, a greater understanding by both groups of the strengths and weaknesses of both native speaker-fronted Communicative Language Teaching programmes and Japanese-taught Grammar-Translation programmes would assist in the development of a more effective dialogue and mutually-supportive activities. Instead of insisting on the maintenance or the destruction of Grammar-Translation programmes, Grammar-Translation should be granted a rightful, but not exclusive, role in Japan's L2 education. At the same time, Japanese teachers should accept other forms of grammar training as useful adjuncts to their classes and native speakers should acknowledge the rightful place of grammar in conventional Communicative Language Teaching programmes.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Grammar, Grammar-Translation, Mombusho

Research Rationale ~

The myth that Japanese cannot learn English and other foreign languages simply because they are Japanese still persists even among well-educated Japanese, some of whom remain strangely smug about this idea. The return from overseas of increasing numbers of Japanese businessmen and students with foreign language fluency has, however, helped to discredit that notion. Mombusho has noted the apparent connection between the length of time spent outside Ja-

pan and the degree of foreign language fluency acquired by Japanese. Apparently assuming that it is total cultural immersion, rather than a different approach to language study, that makes the difference, Mombusho has begun an expensive system to send large numbers of public school language teachers overseas for extended periods of English study. Yet, there is already a large number of native speakers and Japanese fluent in English within the Japanese education system who seem to have been generally unsuccessful in transferring their fluency to a significant number of students. Therefore, the question that must be asked is whether having a larger number of Japanese teachers fluent in English will, by itself, make a significant difference in the acquisition of English language fluency by the general Japanese population. Under normal circumstances, such a major effort should be sufficient to have the desired effect. Despite the importance of having more, highly fluent Japanese teachers of English in Japan's public schools, however, it is this researcher's contention that this plan will not be sufficient by itself to produce Mombusho's desired impact on Japan's student population. The reason for this dilemma is that a set of factors in the Japanese educational and social systems continues to be counter-productive to most second language acquisition.

Research is needed to correctly identify those impediments to language learning as the villains that they are. Japanese social factors that might tend to retard or distort second language acquisition will include, but not be limited to: difficulties with the official national *romaji* system, the use of katakana instead of *romaji* for loan words, *katakana* writing and pronunciation of English words and Japanese-English words, the inappropriateness of loan-word meanings and the incomprehensibility of loan-word pronunciation and grammatical forms, as well as the inter-connected myths of uniqueness of the Japanese people and social system and the Japanese inability to learn foreign languages. Japanese educational factors that may tend to retard or to discourage second language acquisition will include, but not be limited to: the continued emphasis on the grammar-translation approach to language study at all levels, the pre-occupation of Japanese teachers with antiquated and difficult vocabulary and grammar items, the dependence on, and predominance of, Japanese as a language of communication and explanation in second language classrooms, the bureaucratical-

ly-convenient grouping of students into language classes without regard to the mixed levels of student ability, the high school focus on university entrance examination preparation, and the suppression of systematic and coordinated approaches to language study in favor of teacher-independence, especially at the university level. Those factors within Japan's educational and social environment that will unnecessarily continue to undermine Mombusho's plans to improve Japan's opportunities for second language acquisition must be clearly identified and dealt with. Failure to do so will result in the continued waste of the nation's time, money, and effort that is spent on second language learning.

Miscued Actors ~

Those Japanese involved in second language acquisition research tend to be the exception in Japan. They are generally unusually successful learners of a second language as a means of communication whose special learning circumstances tended to have protected them from the pitfalls usually encountered by Japanese attempting to learn another language. Their success makes it difficult for them to understand these difficulties or to appreciate the need to press for their elimination. Their earlier success encourages them to blame the language learner and either to underestimate the difficulties encountered in L2 acquisition or to consider those difficulties as something that everyone should struggle to overcome before deserving admission to their elite group. Conversely, Japanese involved in institutional-level policy-making about language learning tend to be those who have acquired an academic, rather than a communicative, knowledge of a second language. Tending to feel professionally threatened by colleagues or students with communicative competence, they are unlikely to be supporters of educational reforms that might weaken their authority. Thus, one Japanese group of educators tends to ignore and the other group tends to protect aspects of the Japanese educational and social systems that may be causing harm to the language learning. This makes most of them unsuitable researchers in the field of socio-educational impediments to second language acquisition and unlikely advocates for reform. On the other hand, foreign experts on EFL and ESL education as well as native speaker instructors in Japan tend to readily attack any obvious socio-educational issues, such as Japan's senior high school and univer-

sity English entrance examination system and the continued emphasis on the Grammar-Translation Method of L2 pedagogy that seem counter-productive to L2 acquisition. Unfortunately, their well-intentioned but culturally-arrogant opinions suffer from a limited and superficial understanding of Japanese society and the social implications of their proposed reforms. Regardless of whether members of these groups are complaining among themselves or attacking each other, however, seldom is the topic of grammar education far from the surface, and even more seldom is the topic of grammar adequately understood. Resolving some of the misunderstandings and settling some of the issues involving grammar would be an important step to establishing a more rational dialogue among these groups of educators.

The Various Faces of Native Speaker Grammar ~

A lot of potential opportunities have been ignored and a great deal of unnecessary damage has been done to the classroom teaching and learning of second languages (L2s) – as well as first languages (L1s) – because of grossly over-simplified misunderstandings of changes to both theories and practices in these fields during the last fifty years. Since the 1970s, the teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL) and the teaching of English as a second language (TESL) have both experienced what has correctly been regarded as a very major theoretical and pedagogical jump from 'grammar-based' approaches [such as Grammar-Translation, Situational Language Teaching, and the Audio-Lingual Method] to 'communicative' approaches [such as Communicative Language Teaching, Task-Based Language Teaching, Cooperative Language Learning, and Content-Based Instruction]. Despite this 'about-face' in the primary focus of these approaches and despite the efforts of many theoreticians and practitioners, however, there has actually been no absolute break from grammatical and structural content in either the theory or the practice of TEFL/TESL. This is true with the application of either a general or a specialized definition of grammar.

Although many communicative classrooms either denigrate or ignore both grammar and grammar teaching, at the theoretical level there has not been so much a rejection of grammar as a shift away from an excessive emphasis on 'formal', or 'good', grammar production and the explicit indoctrination of that

grammar in favour of a primary focus on 'authentic' language and student acquisition of 'meaningful' communication. In fact, when the Communicative Approach was first "assembled" in 1972, Dell Hymes, as the originator of the term "Communicative Competence", ranked linguistic, or grammatical, competence as the first of his five communicative competences ahead of XXX. By 1980, Canale and Swain considered communicative competence to consist of the three components of grammatical competence (vocabulary and rules), sociolinguistic competence (communicative appropriateness), and strategic competence (communicative strategies) – in that order. Thus, according to the dominant theorists of the following decades, there has never been an outright rejection of grammar but merely an adjustment as to degree and approach so that "One of the most characteristic features of communicative language teaching is that it pays systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language" (Littlewood, 1981, p.1) Despite this distinction, many classroom instructors and syllabus designers have managed to misconstrue these shifts in focus to root out grammar from the classroom. At the same time, however, these same teachers have been able to utilize whatever L2 grammar skills have already been acquired by their students in Japanese-led, Grammar-Translation classrooms upon which to conduct their communicative activities, As a response to the unsatisfactory results achieved by those language classroom curricula that have misunderstood or ignored the theoretical guidelines and totally distanced themselves from any form of grammar education, there have been increasingly overt efforts in recent years by today's leading theoreticians, such as Robert DeKeyser, Rod Ellis, and Henry Widdowson, to attempt to confute this common pedagogical misunderstanding about the rightful importance of grammar and to facilitate the (re)integration of some form of grammar component into the curricula of those communicative classrooms.

The shift away from grammar in communicative practice has actually been even less noticeable to the extent that grammar is also a description of the linguistic structure of a language that is focused on language at the sentence level. Even in communicative classroom activities, the emphasis remains on using word and phrase combinations primarily to produce single sentences and, to a much more limited extent, sentence combinations, such as adjacent pairs and

certain forms of extended speech. Even the most 'progressive' communicative classroom activities seldom venture beyond the development of structural linguistic skills, or 'grammar' in this non-pedagogical sense. In fact, classroom development seldom even extends beyond this very narrow grammatical focus to include the non-structural aspects of (English) grammatical competence, such as semantics (semantic differentials) and phonology, including pronunciation and suprasegmentals, (such as: stress-timed rhythm, intonation patterns, content stress {emphasis}, pitch, pausing, and phrasing) despite increasing theoretical interest in these areas because of their importance to effective communication. One reason for their avoidance in the classroom has been the requirement that such skills actually be taught and patterned by native L1 speakers, rather than simply acquired through the inter-student L2 pair-work and group activities that are expected to provide the primary learning opportunities in most communicative classrooms. As a result, some very fundamental aspects of 'authentic communication' have failed to be addressed in the classrooms and the textbooks, thereby depriving the learner of many second language (L2) communicative skills that both the student and the instructor may fail to even recognize as essential if the student is to avoid being handicapped on the native speaker's home turf.

It is past time that native speaker instructors come to terms with the need to acknowledge the importance of grammar as a major theoretical underpinning of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). It is past time that they realize that Krashen's five main hypotheses of the Natural Approach generally run counter to the principles of CLT, and cannot provide an excuse to exclude grammar from the CLT classroom. With this understanding, it is more likely that native speaker teachers can reach some common ground as to the employment of grammar education in the classroom.

The Angry Face of the Japanese Grammar-Translation Teacher ~

A detailed study of Mitsuko Takahashi's PhD thesis on "The Efficacy of Grammar Instruction in EFL Classes in Japan" is worthy of careful study not because it is a good thesis but because it reflects many of the narrow misunderstandings of second language acquisition held by many Japanese teachers of

English. First, the thesis attempts to discredit native speakers of English and Communicative Language Teaching by criticizing Krashen's five main hypotheses of the Natural Approach without any understanding that Krashen has always been anathema to those who properly understand the true principles of Communicative Language Teaching. Second, Ms. Takahashi blames the deteriorating English ability of Japanese high school students on the fact that the number of classroom hours had been reduced by Mombusho, but considers the solution to that problem to be the elimination of the JET/ALT programmes because these native speakers are not trained teachers and do not understand English grammar, notwithstanding the obvious facts that Mombusho has fostered the JET and ALT programmes for exactly those reasons and that the best way to restore the English standards would be to restore the number of classroom hours. Third, in discussing the need for student grammar, Ms. Takahashi uses the terms grammar and Grammar-Translation as if they were interchangeable and the only way to teach grammar is through Grammar-Translation.

It is past time that Japanese teachers of English come to terms with a proper understanding of the various approaches to grammar training and a true understanding of Communicative Language Teaching, one which does not include Krashen. It is also past time that Japanese teachers of English come to realize that their true enemies are the encumbrances of the Entrance Exam system and the dictates of Mombusho. With this understanding, it is more likely that Japanese teachers of English can be encouraged to develop their own English abilities and to adopt alternative teaching strategies so that native speaker teachers are no longer required to meet their students real English needs.

A Neutral Appraisal of Grammar-Translation~

"(T)he history of language teaching during the past fifty years describes, chiefly, a search for the single, most effective 'method' of optimizing learning while standardizing and, hopefully, minimizing teaching" (Strevens (1977) p. 3). This seems strange when so much has been made of the fact that different learners maximize their potential under different learning systems and when the teacher is considered the critical motivating factor.

Although Grammar-Translation does make it onto a few comparative

methods charts (e.g. Celce-Merica, 1991, p. 6), little is actually said about Grammar-Translation in the methodologies sections of the major instructed acquisition textbooks by writers such as Ellis, Rodgers, and Brown where it does not get its own section and is limited to a 'prescript' to the theories, approaches, and methods of the twentieth century. These prescripts all tend to repeat the same bare-bones explanation for the development of the Grammar-Translation Method in terms of the European classical tradition of education which included learning the dead languages of Latin and Greek, for reasons connected to intellectual training, rather than to the practical function of communication. When the same method was later applied to living European languages, still without much expectation that more than a reading knowledge of the language might be required, it was not the plight of generations of bored schoolboys wasting their time but the dictates of efficient communication during wartime that put a stop to it.

Almost no one ever seems to mention whether Grammar-Translation or other teaching methods were utilized during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to ensure that the international (Roman Catholic) clergy actually worked and taught in Latin as a lingua franca while the upper and educated classes throughout Europe later successfully acquired and utilized French as a lingua franca. The exception seems to be Celce-Merica (1991), who explains these centuries as a constant shifting between language use and language analysis. However, even she can only "assume that the teachers or tutors used informal and direct approaches to convey the form and meaning of the (foreign) language" during these periods of actual use. (p. 4). Also, perhaps social scientists from the American cultural 'melting pot' simply assume that public and special schools played absolutely no relevant role in French Canadians learning to communicate in English or in young Chinese Canadians maintaining their linguistic duality, not to mention multi-lingual Belgians, Swiss, and European Jews before mid-century. Otherwise, they would have to either re-evaluate the effectiveness and purpose of the Grammar-Translation Method if it was being used in these schools or establish what other language teaching methods were being successfully applied at that time before their simplistic rejection of Grammar-Translation receives carte blanche acceptance. Although Asian education systems may

finally be mentioned later in some of these texts as the primary Grammar-Translation holdovers, these ethnocentric social scientists feel no need to examine the historical development and possible uniqueness of this method in these constituencies. The reader is left to assume that the Grammar -Translation method was first imported into Japan and the rest of Asia by the earliest European traders. However, the traditional methods of studying Confucian, Buddhist, and other ancient Chinese texts in Japanese, Korean, and 'modern' Chinese cultures may well account for any special features and the longevity of these Asian variations of this linguistic tradition. If so, it is theoretically possible that the Asian varieties of Grammar-Translation may still have merit even if the European version does not. This is particularly true with increasing studies suggesting the cultural bias of most social-science research and the possibility that western subjects will test for the exception, rather than the norm. (See especially any articles on the work of Dr. Joseph Henrich of Canada's University of British Columbia, including Adam McDowell's article in the National Post cited in the references.)

However, it also seems that at least the early research studies failed to actually prove the inferiority of the Grammar-Translation Method in the Western classroom. According to Ellis (1990), large-scale studies were limited to the pre- and post–test based Scherer and Wertheimer study (1964), which compared the Grammar-Translation Method and the Audio-lingual Method, and the Pennsylvania Project (1990), which compared the Grammar-Translation Method (traditional), the Audio-lingual Method (inductive), and the Cognitive Code Method (deductive), neither of which was "able to demonstrate that one teaching method was significantly more effective in promoting L2 learning than another" (p. 10). Thus, the Grammar-Translation Method seems to have been banished from Western classrooms for reasons that had little to do with any proven or quantifiable teaching inefficacy of that method, at least in terms of the alternatives available at that time.

An Analysis of Grammar-Translation as Generic Product ~

A (more logical) re-ordering of Celce-Marcia's (1991, p. 6) main features of the Grammar-Translation Method as an analytical process included: (1) There

is little classroom use of the target language. (2) The teacher need not be able to actually speak the target language. (3) Actual instruction is given in the students' native language. (4) A major focus is grammatical parsing. (5) There is early (pre-mature?) reading of difficult texts, primarily through translation. (6) A typical exercise is to translate (random) sentences from the target language into the mother tongue. (7) The result of this approach is USUALLY an inability on the part of the student (or the teacher?) to use the target language for communication outside (or inside?) the classroom. To this list should be probably be added: (8) the rote memorization of lists of extensive vocabulary. The Direct Approach and the Audio-linguistic Method, which replaced the Grammar-Translation Method in most Western classrooms, theoretically rejected or reversed all of these features of the Grammar-Translation Method, although there is evidence (Ellis, 1990, P. 10) that the classroom reality was not as absolute. However, these following decades have seen these two approaches replaced by a series of methods and approaches, many of which reverted to one or more of the main features of the Grammar-Translation Method until most of these features have returned to a state of at least partial credibility, at least when they are examined outside the Grammar-Translation 'umbrella'. For example, the Reading Approach subordinated oral skills to reading skills, approved of grammar instruction and translation practice, and limited the instructor's target language requirements. The Cognitive Approach also reverted to deductive grammar skills and, since then, Ellis and others have insisted on the need for some kind of role for grammar studies even in overtly communicative syllabi. Because of the many classroom uses of "translation", Rivers (1978) finds it difficult to decide for or against it. "The main objection to translation ... has been that it imposes an intermediate process between the concept and the way it is expressed in the foreign language, thus hindering the development of the ability to think directly in the new language. However, it may be argued that even when students have been taught by 'direct' methods, they often mentally interpose the intermediate translation process themselves in the early stages." (p. 362) The Affective-Humanistic Approach actually encouraged teacher-translation as an essential element of beginner classes, while considerable disagreement has followed as to the need for target language exclusivity or the efficiency of an explanatory role

for the mother language. Indeed, translation as a useful learning tool even for elementary students has been defended by specialists in that field, much to the surprise of this author (J. House, Autumn 1993, Tokyo, private conversation). The most recent vindication appears to be that the Lexical Approach has re-introduced the importance of vocabulary study. Conversely, "the pendulum may have swung too far in the direction of spoken language activities, and many teachers are now seeking to increase the effort applied to ... written language" (Strevens, 1977, p. 109). Weaknesses in the 'immediate communication view', such as a dependence on prior learning of vocabulary and grammar points to avoid fossilization of forms and permit continued expansion of communicative abilities, has caused some of the attributes of the 'progressive development view' to be regarded more positively. "This is the approach of grammar-translation texts, where it is assumed that accuracy in expressing oneself orally is dependent on prior study of language forms through reading and written exercises." (Rivers et al, 1978, p. 6) While it may be argued that the actual combination of the primary characteristics of the Grammar-Translation Method was too incomplete and too anti-motivational, at least for the needs of Western students, to be resurrected as an optimal Western method, most of these features do appear to have some pedagogic value.

The Local Product ~

Knowing that Japan's school system continues to employ an antiquated foreign language teaching methodology that had been discredited and essentially discontinued in Western countries at least half a century ago and that occupies a large part of the six years of Japanese secondary schooling without succeeding in improving student English facility has continued to annoy, rather than to confuse, many native speaker teachers of English in Japan. Most of these native speaker teachers continued to believe that, as long as the Japanese high school and university system continued to employ Japanese teachers of English who lacked minimal English ability in the four skills (when unassisted by a dictionary) and as long as these teachers and their students exclusively used Japanese to conduct their study of English, the students would not be able to improve their English facility. They also understood that as long as success

in high school English (and other) courses was determined by success in the university entrance exam system and the English entrance exams focused on Grammar-Translation skills, rather than on general English facility, there would be little pressure for change to the teaching system from within Japanese society. At the same time, they realized that the fact that the Jukus', language schools', and native speaker teachers' symbiotic dependence on this failed public school system of English education would continue to silence the natural critics and reformers. Therefore, it seemed as if everyone inside and outside the Japanese system was complicit in this unsuccessful, but mutually satisfactory, situation. Any native speaker effort to improve the situation seemed to focus attention on the means to put an end to the Grammar-Translation Method in Japan. However, proper reflection on what needs to be done to realistically improve the situation, suggests that the elimination of the Grammar-Translation Method in Japan might actually create more problems than it would solve.

If this is the case, however, why has the Japan Grammar-Translation Method failed so miserably to independently produce even a significant minority of students able to actually use the English language at least at an elementary level? Must the Grammar-Translation Method be rooted out if the Japanese are ever going to get beyond their mistaken belief that the Japanese psyche is to blame for their inability to acquire a second language? Could the local method be replaced and the problem solved by a greater influx of native speakers proselytizing the communicative tract?

The examination of the Japanese educational situation in conjunction with study of the Grammar-Translation Method generally has led to the realization that – despite the limitations that the Grammar Translation Method almost certainly has – the fault for the largely wasted effort on English education in Japan's public high schools is not so much the fault of the teaching method as it is the result of the abuses imposed upon that method in order to meet Japan's short-sighted educational goals within the constraints of the Japanese system.

Despite its formal espousal of democratic principles, Japan remains an exam-driven meritocracy subservient to an educational-employment hierarchical system. As a result, the schools operate a one-chance-and-you-are-out, lockstep system which moves forward without regard to the carnage that is left in its

wake of significant numbers of uncomprehending students either dropping out or struggling to keep up "after a fashion". It permits teachers to be judged according to the numbers of their students who get through the exam process, rather than according to their actual pedagogic skills. This permits the government to limit funds to the education system because a rote-learning, exam-oriented system can operate with larger classes while the *Juku* system – for a price and for those who can afford it – partially hides the actual inefficiencies of the process. Subjects that are fact-based and very compartmentalized, such as the social sciences, can survive – if not flourish under such a system. However, skills that are cumulative, such as mathematics and foreign languages, suffer severely in such a system. Fortunately, with high national skills in mathematics, its teachers tend to have a solid grasp of their subject matter and can present it to their students with confidence. Unfortunately, foreign languages are not similarly blessed.

Japanese foreign language teachers are not required to have functional competence in the actual use of the language. As a result, they generally cannot teach or model the skills that students need for communicative competence. Their insecurities and the excuse of examination priorities even discourage them from maximizing the potential utility of native speaker assistants. The students are further held back by katakana-English presentation of the materials and by the position of the teacher as authority figure who should not be challenged or questioned. This permits the teacher to hide behind frequently outmoded and excessively complicated grammatical structures and lexical items which keep the student dependent on the teacher, not so that his English can be improved but so that he can succeed in the entrance examinations. This encourages the addition of several excessive features which unfairly further discredit the basic Grammar-Translation Method: (9) a failure to order the vocabulary, grammatical parsing, or the reading / translation exercises according to level of difficulty or frequency, (10) presentation of the material with little concern for the students' ability to actually understand these materials and with minimal opportunities for practice with and later reinforcing recapitulation of these materials.

In order to replace the present Japanese version of the Grammar-Transla-

tion Model by an approach or method that better meets present Western standards of foreign language education, first the entrance exam system(s) would need to be removed or replaced so that it no longer acted as an excuse to perpetuate an unsatisfactory system; secondly many of the present teachers (at both the high school and university levels would need to be replaced by native speakers or Japanese who already possessed adequate spoken-language and pedagogic skills to cope with a more communicative method; and, finally, the government would have to be both willing and able to finance such a drastic change. All of this is highly unlikely in the immediate or near future, making other accommodations a practical necessity.

Accommodation ~

An ideal solution to the limitations and weaknesses included in the teaching and learning processes involved in second language (English) programmes in Japan is highly unlikely in the immediate future. However, with the realization that the complicated nature of the problem was not limited to a particular teaching methodology or even to the abuses of that methodology a greater understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of both native speaker-fronted Communicative Language Teaching programmes and Japanese-taught Grammar-Translation programmes by both groups would assist in the development of a more effective dialogue and mutually-supportive activities. Instead of insisting on the maintenance or the destruction of Grammar-Translation programmes, Grammar-Translation should be granted a rightful, but not exclusive role in Japan's L2 education. At the same time Japanese teachers should accept other forms of grammar training as useful adjuncts to their classes and native speakers should acknowledge the rightful place of grammar in conventional Communicative Language Teaching programmes.

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